

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 27, 2005

## SAN DIEGO BEACH ACCESSIBILITY IMPROVEMENTS

File No. 04-101

Project Manager: Prentiss F. Williams

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars to the City of San Diego to implement a series of improvements, including the continuation of the “Power Beach Chairs” program and the expanded use of portable beach wheelchair ramps, necessary to increase and improve access to City beaches by persons with physical disabilities.

**LOCATION:** Ocean Beach in the City of San Diego, San Diego County (Exhibit 1).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Photo of beach wheelchairs in use

Exhibit 3: Map of San Diego Beaches

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the City of San Diego to implement a series of improvements, including the continuation of the “Power Beach Chairs” program and the expanded use of portable beach wheelchair ramps, necessary to increase and improve access to City beaches by persons with physical disabilities, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the City shall submit for the approval of the Executive Officer:
  - a. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation.
  - b. Written acknowledgment that the City will maintain the equipment for a period of no less than five years, or for the useful life of the equipment, whichever is greater.

- c. Evidence that the City has obtained all necessary permits and approvals needed to install and operate the improvements.
2. The City shall be responsible for assembling, installing, maintaining and storing the equipment used in the program, for making it available for the public's use, and for publicizing the availability of the equipment."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31405) regarding public access to the coast.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local public needs."

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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The City of San Diego proposes to improve access to and on the City's beaches for people with physical disabilities by continuing a program which makes motorized beach wheelchairs available to the public, by expanding the use of temporary beach wheelchair ramps on city beaches, and by introducing a new technology designed to assist visually impaired persons visiting the beach.

The purchase of two new motorized wheelchairs is necessary in order for the City to continue its very popular "Power Beach Chairs" program that makes motorized wheelchairs available free of charge to persons with impaired mobility. The program is a joint effort between the City of San Diego and Accessible San Diego, a non-profit disability rights organization and has been operating successfully in San Diego County since 1999. The program utilizes specially designed "balloon tire" wheelchairs, which enable users to safely traverse the sandy beach independently (Exhibit 2). The City currently has two such wheelchairs in use at Mission Beach (Exhibit 2), but the chairs are 3 years old and in need of replacement due to the effects of sand, salt and heavy use. Additionally, replacement parts for the older model chairs are increasingly difficult to obtain, which often results in one or both of the chairs being rendered unavailable for extended periods while awaiting repair. The replacement beach wheelchairs would be a newer, improved model and would be expected to last five years or longer and be easier to maintain than the wheelchairs currently in use at Mission Beach.

The wheelchairs are stored in lockers at the Mission Beach lifeguard station, and checked out by Accessible San Diego employees. Accessible San Diego employs primarily persons with disabilities, including veterans and seniors to operate the program. Currently the chairs are available to the public five days a week most of the year. The Power Beach Chair program is particularly popular because the availability of motorized wheelchairs enables independent movement that is not possible with non-motorized beach wheelchairs. In the summer season, the chairs are in almost constant use and most users choose to schedule appointments to assure the

availability. Local school districts periodically bring special needs classes to enjoy the power beach chairs, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation has sent children from all over the United States to San Diego to experience the freedom of riding self-propelled along the beach in the one of the City's beach wheelchairs.

The Power Beach Chair program at Mission Beach is one of only two such programs operating in the United States. The Port of San Diego operates the other program in the City of Imperial Beach. The City of San Diego is considering expanding the Power Beach Chair Program to all of the City Beaches over the next 10 years. It is currently in the process of obtaining public input on how to best utilize limited funds for increasing beach access. The City plans to eventually provide some combination of power beach chairs, electronic signal devices, text telephones at all City beaches to improve the beach-going experience for people of all abilities.

In addition to providing visitors with the use of the beach wheelchairs, the City also enhances beach use by persons with impaired mobility through the use of ramps on City beaches. These ramps, which rest on top of sand that has been smoothed by a tractor, are installed in mid-May and left in place until after Labor Day and enable access to the sandy beach not only by wheelchair users, but by any beach visitors who are unable to safely traverse soft sand, including senior citizens and parents with strollers. The City currently deploys such ramps at three of its beaches and would eventually like to expand their use to another 2 to 3 City beaches, if feasible. The City is requesting Conservancy funding to purchase two different types of access ramps for use at various beach locations and conditions to compliment existing ramps (i.e. extend existing lengths, locate at beaches with no ramps) and replace worn ramps.

The final component of the City's planned beach accessibility improvements involves the introduction of an innovative technology that enables the visually impaired to navigate their location on the beach through the use of radio transmitters and receivers. This technology will thus allow visitors with impaired vision to safely and independently walk along the beach. The technology consists of radio transmitters that would be mounted on poles and placed on the beach at intervals of approximately 25-100 yards depending on the device. Visually impaired visitors desiring to walk along the beach would then be issued a small portable radio receiver, which enables the user to monitor his or her location on the beach by picking up the signals emitted by the transmitters. The visitor can thereby walk along the shore and safely return to his or her starting point unassisted. This is a new technology that is in use at only a few locations nationwide. However the relatively low capital cost of the equipment (under \$10,000) makes it a good candidate for a pilot program at Mission Beach. Staff assigned to manage the motorized wheelchair program would also check out the radio receivers. The radio transmitters are easily set up and taken down. The City intends to introduce and test the program this summer at Mission Beach. If it proves successful, the program could be expanded to other City beaches in future years.

**Site Description:** There are eleven ocean beaches within the San Diego city limits, five of which are intensely developed with visitor serving facilities such as rest rooms and lifeguard stations, and are readily accessible to persons with disabilities: La Jolla Shores, Pacifica Beach, Mission Beach, South Mission Beach, and Ocean Beach. With the exception of La Jolla Shores, the rest of these beaches are all located along a two mile long stretch of broad, sandy beach known as the

The Strand (Exhibit 3). The four beaches located along The Strand are the most popular beaches in San Diego and draw most of the millions of people (over 22,000,000 in 2003) who visit the City's beaches each year. The beaches along The Strand are all served by cement boardwalks which run parallel to the shoreline and are wheelchair accessible. At both Mission and Ocean Beaches, special ramps connect the parking lots directly to the sandy beach to allow for wheelchair access.

**Project History:** Motorized beach chairs have been in use at Mission Beach since early 2000. Accessible San Diego initiated the program and worked with the City of San Diego to obtain funding from the Coastal Conservancy. (Accessible San Diego also worked to establish the Power Beach Chair program in Imperial Beach.) At that time all other beach wheelchairs needed a second person to push them through the sand. The introduction of the motorized beach chairs provided a great improvement by allowing freedom of movement on the beach to all persons with impaired mobility.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
City of San Diego	\$53,000
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$153,000</b>

The intended source of funds for the Conservancy grant is the Conservancy's FY 02/03 appropriation from the Coastal Access Account. Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project would involve a grant to a public agency for the development, maintenance, and operation of existing facilities that provide public access to the shoreline.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31405), which establishes the Conservancy's role in implementing a system of public accessways to and along the State's coastline. Through the proposed authorization, the Conservancy would play a role in providing an important public coastal access opportunity for persons with disabilities.

Consistent with Section 31400, the proposed project would provide funding to the City to effectively guarantee the right of members of the public, including those with impaired mobility, to access and enjoy coastal resources.

Consistent with Section 31400.1, the proposed project would serve a need greater than the immediate local area. The beaches of San Diego serve the residents from throughout San Diego County, both coastal and inland areas, as well as visitors from throughout the State. According to City records, attendance at the City's bay and ocean beach parks has increased from just over 13 million yearly visitors in 2001 to more than 22 million in 2003. Statistics compiled by Accessible San Diego indicate that the Power Beach Chair program served close to 300 unduplicated clients in 2003 and over 200 in 2004, more than half of which were from outside San Diego County. (The City attributes the reduction in the number of clients served in 2004 to the fact that the

chairs were under repair and out of service for more days in 2004 than in 2003, underscoring the need for replacement.) Thus, the proposed accessibility improvements will benefit visitors from well beyond the local area.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, the amount of funding proposed has been reviewed in light of the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, and the relative urgency of the project. Consistent with Section 31400.3, the project would aid the City in establishing a system of public coastal access by removing barriers to certain segments of the public.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase public access opportunities for persons with physical disabilities by providing additional means of access to and along the ocean shoreline within the City of San Diego.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

##### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The implementation of the accessibility improvements at the City's beaches has broad-based support from throughout the local community and beyond. Conservancy staff has received letters, of support, attached in Exhibit 4, from State Senator Dede Alpert, Assemblywoman Christine Kehoe, representatives of the City of San Diego Citizens Review Committee on Disability Access Issues, and others.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City of San Diego.
5. **Need:** Due to current City of San Diego budget deficits, the City is only able to contribute \$53,000 cash to this program (the City will contribute staff and other in-kind services). Without additional funding from Coastal Conservancy, the City will not be able to purchase equipment needed to implement is accessibility program this spring.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above, the proposed project would serve the needs of people from throughout the region and the state.

### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** In order to implement the accessibility program in the 2005 summer season, the City must order the necessary equipment no later than early March, 2005. The City must be assured of the Conservancy funding before it can place orders with the equipment vendors.
11. **Innovation:** Through the continuation and expansion of the Power Beach Chairs program, the City is maintaining support for a means of beach access that is only available at one other beach in the nation. The introduction of the radio transmitter system at Mission Beach would represent the first such use of this innovative technology on a public beach. Should this pilot project prove successful and feasible, the City's program could serve as a model for other public facilities throughout the country.
12. **Readiness:** Should the Conservancy approve the proposed project, the City of San Diego would purchase the additional beach wheelchairs, the beach ramps, and the radio transmitter system and install them for use on the City's beaches this summer.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL CONSERVANCY'S STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:**

Consistent with Standard No. 3 which states in part, that "Wheelchair access should be provided wherever possible." Consistent with this standard, the proposed project would increase accessibility to the sandy beach by people with physical disabilities.

Conservancy funding of the proposed project is also consistent with Standard No. 13, which states that "Accessways that accommodate or plan to accommodate those with mobility problems are the highest priority for State funding."

### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The project is consistent with the City of San Diego's Local Coastal Program/Land Use Plan, which calls for maximum feasible public access to the ocean beaches (Circulation and Shoreline Access, Section E, pp. 66-71).

### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project would be categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it would involve the placement of minor temporary structures (beach-accessible wheelchairs, wheelchair ramps and portable radio transmitters) on existing public beaches (14 California Code of Regulation, Section 15311). Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.